

Maquoketa artist creates portrait of her town

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Maquoketa, Ia. - Maddy Rolling's grandmother is a persuasive woman.

"She's like, 'This is so cool. This is awesome. You should do it,' " said Rolling, 14.

So there the granddaughter sat, statue-still in a Main Street window while Rose Frantzen painted her portrait. Rolling watched the progress in a mirror behind the easel and had to agree with her grandmother on the final result.

"I was amazed," she said.

Her square-foot portrait, as well as Frantzen's renderings of 179 other people around town, is part of the "Portrait of Maquoketa" on display in the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. The collection is part of a three-person show called "Portraiture Now: Communities," which opened earlier this month and will be seen by an estimated 700,000 visitors before it closes in July.

About 70 Maquoketans, including Rolling and some of the other "sitters," traveled to Washington for the opening reception. Half of the group made the trip on a bus, abuzz with anticipation about seeing the portraits - *their* portraits - on such prominent display.

They weren't disappointed.

"I'm not really an art person, but I was in tears," said Judy Bowling, 68, who ran a cocktail lounge for most of the last 25 years. "It was so emotional."

The show's impact really sank in when she left her own portrait, clustered with the others on the main floor, and ventured upstairs.

"Right above us are all the presidents, and I thought, 'Wow, we're with some pretty important dignitaries,' " she said.

Wendy Scott, 55, who owns RonAnn's Floral Shoppe on the west end of town, called her son in Des Moines. He thought she was pulling his leg.

" 'What? Are you nuts?' " she remembers him saying. "He was in awe that that was even a possibility."

He wasn't alone. Everybody, even Frantzen, underestimated the power of a few oil paints and some patience.

The town the bus returned to looks like a lot of Iowa towns. It's a bedroom community of about 6,000, about halfway between Dubuque and Davenport and not too far from the Maquoketa River, which Sauk and Fox tribes called "Makwok-eteg" - "there are bears."

A few hundred people work at the Family Dollar distribution center south of town, and a hundred more clock in at a factory for hydraulic controls, which moved in last year.

But other businesses are struggling. The downtown that once boasted three clothing shops for men and five for women is a ghost of what it used to be.

It doesn't help that fire chewed up a strip of historic buildings in 2007, right across Main Street from Frantzen's storefront. Firefighters nearly drained the town's water reserves, but they were too late: Shops for home furnishings, flooring and Hallmark cards went up in smoke. The charred rubble still remains.

Sometimes when Maquoketans talk about Frantzen, she sounds like a character from a fairy tale, a mysterious stranger who blew into town and worked her magic.

But Frantzen is a native. She grew up here and, like most kids, couldn't wait to leave when she finished high school. She bounced around to bigger cities for a while - Chicago, New

York - before returning on a whim in the spring of 1991. She imagined renting a farmhouse with an apple tree, painting whatever inspired her and hitting the road a few months later.

Instead, a real estate agent showed her the old city hall, which was up for sale. For reasons Frantzen still can't explain, she and her parents made a spontaneous bid on the property.

The next day it was theirs. Over the next few weeks, they gave it a new roof and a new coat of paint. Over the next few months, they turned it into a gallery for Frantzen's paintings and her dad's landscape photographs.

And for about 10 months after that, Frantzen bawled. She was 25, single, politically liberal, vegetarian and stuck in her hometown.

She did the best she could. She taught herself how to make frames in the upstairs studio and, in the summers, hired models to pose for paintings in the surrounding countryside. She made stealth portraits at the sale barn, painting farmers without letting them know.

Occasionally she visited her artist friends back in the big cities, but she always returned to Maquoketa with fresh appreciation. It felt open, quiet, clean.

The idea for the portrait project struck Frantzen during a trip to Fareway in 2005. She'd been thinking for years about how to connect her artwork with a wider community, how to help non-painters understand how it feels when a portrait clicks into focus.

Right there in the grocery store she thought: Why not paint the familiar faces around town? Instead of painting hired models or commissioned portraits, she would democratize the process. She would paint anyone who wanted a portrait and had a few hours to sit.

Her dad, Wayne Frantzen, was dubious.

"Are you crazy?" he told her. "What are we going to do with so many portraits, insulate the building?"

Frantzen knew it was an unusual plan, but that was part of its appeal.

"Historically, the subjects of portraiture have been the powerful, the famous and the revered, and the painters have traditionally been men," writes Suzanne Kelsey in a book about the project. "Frantzen replaced elitism with egalitarianism, turning tradition on its head as a

woman painting Everyman and Everywoman in Small Town, USA."

Frantzen's artist husband, Chuck Morris (a souvenir she brought back from New York), helped her apply for a grant from the Iowa Arts Council. They rented the place on Main Street, the one between the Chinese restaurant and the Home Town Cafe, because they wanted people to feel welcome to just wander in.

They posted a few announcements around town and soon enough, people signed up for four- or five-hour slots - seven hours if they wanted a smile full of teeth.

Some sitters came out of their own curiosity. Others, like 14-year-old Rolling, had a nudge from their family or friends. Frantzen learned later that a few people just figured it would be nice to have something to display at their funerals.

There was a 3-day-old baby. A teenager with lip piercings and a streak of blue hair. An old woman, just three months shy of 100.

Frantzen usually polished off two portraits a day, working from about 1 to 10 p.m. six days a week. She shrank an original goal of 300 portraits to 180 and took a few vacations, but she kept at it, logging a total of 2,000 hours at the easel.

Most of the sitters, unlike the models Frantzen had hired in the past, were unaccustomed to such scrutiny. Silence made them uneasy, so Frantzen usually tossed out a few questions. How long had they lived in Maquoketa? What did they like about it? What would they change?

People opened up almost immediately.

Scott, the florist, compared the sittings to a trip to the beauty parlor, where people spill their guts almost by accident.

"My session was four or five hours, but I could swear it was only 45 minutes," she said. "It was the quickest evening I've ever spent just sitting and doing nothing."

Complete strangers told the artist their life stories. Neighbors she'd known for years surprised her with secrets. Old guys told her they'd never talked so much with anyone, not even their wives.

"When people tell you their stories, their life makes sense to you even if it's messy," said Frantzen, who worked with her brother to record some of the sitters' voices for a sound installation at the Smithsonian show.

Spectators stopped by to watch the progress. The artist's mom, Ellen Frantzen, hauled in a rug and set up chairs. People brought in cocktails and talked until midnight. One sitter, a man in his 80s, passed most of his session in song.

"The portraits have been a real upbeat note for the whole community," said sitter Doug Melvold, the second-generation publisher of the Maquoketa Sentinel-Press.

City leaders plan to clear away Main Street's burnt rubble in the next few weeks, and the Maquoketa Art Experience is spiffing up a storefront across the way. The organization, an offshoot of the portrait project, arranges for visiting artists to use downtown spaces as studios, galleries and classrooms.

But the portrait project's results show up in smaller ways, too. Frantzen's husband jokes that simple errands that once took five minutes now last an hour because she can't go anywhere without bumping into someone she once stared at for at least four hours. Small talk has become bigger.

Rep. Bruce Braley described the project's power in a statement he read into the Congressional Record during the Maquoketans' trip to Washington. He pointed out that none of the portraits looks distinctly Iowan, nor are there any clues about the subjects' connections with one another.

"Together, though, we recognize these individuals are also a community with a shared identity and future," he said.

Ask around town, and people will tell you that future has promise.

"In a subtle way, maybe Rose's project has helped people move in the right direction," florist Scott said. "You know, we're looking forward."

Just like the portraits themselves.